

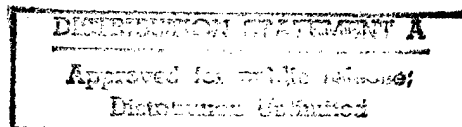


## RISK AND SOVIET SECURITY DECISIONS

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## KEY FINDINGS

- Soviet leaders have generally adopted a risk averse approach to procuring weapons and using military power, especially if the latter meant risking direct confrontation with the United States. This pattern has remained generally true even as relative Soviet military capabilities have grown.
- This is not to say the Soviets never take risks. They are quick to take advantage of opportunities that arise, provided the risks are not too high. They also appear more willing to take larger risks if the costs of inaction appear greater.
- There are several exceptions to general Soviet risk aversion in using military power. But in each instance, the Soviet Union has fared rather badly when it chanced large risks in pursuit of correspondingly high potential gains. Such experiences are likely to discourage similar behavior in future.
- For these reasons, the preferred Soviet security strategy appears to be one that offers small, but steady, gains in return for minimizing Soviet exposure to risk and uncertainty.
- The foregoing suggests the Soviets will also take a low risk approach to dealing with the U.S. Strategic Defense System. This would probably include:
  - A preference for countermeasures which incorporate proven technologies and/or proliferation of multiple measures with overlapping coverage.
  - No direct action against SDS in peace time to avoid the kind of confrontation with the U.S. that could lead to war.

## RISK AND SOVIET SECURITY DECISIONS

Soviet leaders try to minimize risk in procuring weapons and using military power. This historical pattern has remained generally constant even as relative Soviet military capabilities have increased *vis a vis* the West over the last two decades. However, there have also been some notable exceptions to such conservative behavior. Indeed, it may be that these exceptions--and their generally unfortunate consequences for the Soviets--have reinforced Soviet reluctance to take major risks with military power.

### I. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS

Contemporary Soviet views on risk have been shaped by powerful historical and cultural forces. These include the precepts of communist ideology, the nature of the domestic political apparatus which seldom rewards innovation, and Soviet experiences in the crucible of war.

Communist ideology holds that history, and hence time, are on the side of communism in its struggle against capitalism. Consequently, Soviet leaders feel little need to "push" history for short-term political gains before conditions are right.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, Soviet leaders are acutely aware that premature attempts to influence the course of history can have very adverse consequences since the West remains dangerous in the short run.

Ideological notions that discourage unnecessary haste are reinforced by the nature of Soviet domestic politics. Here there is a perennial struggle for power. In such an environment, political survival rests on personal standing and on making the right decisions. Since personal position is always tenuous, Soviet leaders must continually promote an image of growing strength. Failing that, a leader must avoid the appearance of

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<sup>1</sup>Benjamin S. Lambeth, Risk and Uncertainty in Soviet Deliberations About War, RAND, R-2687-AF, October 1981, p. 9.

manifest weakness or at least pin his failure on another. Consequently, post-war decision-making has emphasized consensus in order to minimize personal accountability. This, in turn, has generally resulted in conservative solutions to problems.<sup>2</sup>

The inherent insecurity in Soviet political life, when coupled with the tenets of communist ideology, breeds a deep seated desire for control through planning. Such control, in turn, rests on the ability to predict events reasonably well. However, as the degree of risk rises and uncertainty grows, predictability decreases. Consequently, most post-war Soviet decision-making is marked by an incremental approach to problems. The main exception to this pattern is where the risks of inaction appear greater than those associated with a major new undertaking. In such situations, Soviet action may "result more from the need to pre-empt or avert failure than the desire to create big successes".<sup>3</sup>

The Soviet desire for planning is further thwarted by the erratic and somewhat mystifying nature of U.S. military-political behavior, regardless of the President in office. Just prior to the Korean War, for example, the U.S. Secretary of State publicly declared that South Korea was outside the U.S. defense perimeter and then the U.S. sent troops under U.N. auspices to repel the North Korean invasion. Sometimes, as with the seizure of the Pueblo and the U.S. embassy in Iran, U.S. Presidents took no action when it might reasonably be expected (and justified in world public opinion). On the other hand, President Carter canceled U.S. participation in the Moscow Olympics, imposed a grain embargo, and sent military assistance to the Afghans in response to the Soviet invasion. All of this was despite apparently minor U.S. security interests in Afghanistan and seemingly more immediate problems with Iran.

Added to Soviet concerns about the "unpredictability" of American actions is their profound respect for American technological capabilities. Where Western analysts emphasize a record of technological failure (Three Mile Island, space shuttle explosion, early failures in the missile program) the Soviets see spectacular successes (putting men on the moon, pioneering microelectronics, developing nuclear-powered, missile-firing submarines). Consequently, Soviet analysts may tend to exaggerate U.S. strengths by attributing larger-than-life performance characteristics to U.S. military forces.<sup>4</sup> All of which reinforces deeply ingrained Soviet instincts toward risk-aversion.

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<sup>2</sup>Dennis Ross, "Risk Aversion in Soviet Decision Making", in Soviet Decisionmaking for National Security, ed. Jiri Valenta and William C. Potter, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1984, pp. 238-245.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>4</sup>Lambeth, Op. Cit., p. 15.

The socio-political instincts against risk-taking were reinforced by practical Soviet experience. World War II inflicted enormous human and economic misery--20 million dead and the economy set back 5 to 10 years.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, war with a major adversary was not to be undertaken lightly. Perhaps more important, given Soviet emphasis on planning and control, there was a strong divergence between pre-war expectations and what actually happened. Prior to hostilities, Soviet analysts confidently predicted that any aggressor would be easily rebuffed.<sup>6</sup> Such was not the case. Thus, Soviet planners came to believe that even worst-case scenarios could not be entirely ignored.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Soviet leaders were deeply impressed by American ability to translate economic potential into military power. Thus, Soviet leaders became very cautious about direct confrontations that might lead to war, especially with the United States.

## II. SOVIET USE OF MILITARY FORCE

### A. Massive Force

Since World War II, Soviet political leaders have rarely used direct, massive military force to achieve policy aims. There are, however, notable exceptions: the invasions of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan as well as the border skirmishes with China in 1969.

In the post-war world, the Soviets were slow to take the military path. Military interventions, when they occurred, came only after considerable Soviet hesitation and search for alternative means of resolving the crises.<sup>8</sup> Prior to the Czechoslovakian invasion of 1968, for example, there were extensive Soviet negotiations to persuade Czech leaders to adopt a more "main line" approach to communism. Only when this failed did Soviet troops intervene. Similarly, the Soviets engaged the Chinese in 1969 only after a diplomatic stalemate and the Chinese attacked Soviet positions along the disputed border.

Where the Soviets have acted decisively, it seemed more to defend the gains of the past than to advance the goals of the future. This pattern was evident in the Soviet invasions of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. In each case, a communist regime on periphery of the Soviet Union appeared in danger of collapsing if Moscow did

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<sup>5</sup>Jonathan R. Adelman and Cristann Lea Gibson, Contemporary Soviet Military Affairs: The Legacy of World War II, Unwin Hyman, Boston 1989, p. 71.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., P. 73.

nothing. Soviet leaders were also ready to act decisively to defend the homeland from direct attack (e.g., Sino-Soviet border clashes in 1969).<sup>9</sup> Thus, desire to avert potential failure, and its high cost, seems a better explanation of Soviet policy behavior than the desire to seize a momentary opportunity for significant advancement.

Soviet leaders have sought to minimize chances of military failure when they have employed force. Consequently, there was marked unwillingness to use the Red Army unless the projected battlefield could be largely isolated and the correlation of forces was overwhelmingly favorable.<sup>10</sup> Thus, when the Soviets have decided to commit Soviet forces, they usually did so in large numbers.

Soviet leaders have also tended to avoid situations where local populations and armed forces appeared ready to resist and/or where Soviet success would come only after a violent war.<sup>11</sup> These traits are exemplified by Soviet decisions not to intervene in Yugoslavia after 1948 or in Poland in 1956 and again in 1980-1981. The main exception to this pattern is Soviet involvement in Afghanistan where they chose to enter a country despite the existence of many armed resistance groups. Perhaps the Soviets believed the regular Afghan Army could handle the bulk of the fighting after the Soviets stabilized the situation in Kabul, or perhaps they underestimated the strength and persistence of the resistance. Either way, subsequent Soviet experience in Afghanistan probably reinforced traditional Soviet reluctance to invade a country having in-place military forces ready to oppose Soviet troops.

As noted already, the direct, massive use of force has been the exception rather than the norm. In each case, the Soviet leadership was slow to commit Soviet troops. However, once they decided to act, the commitment was generally massive to maximize the chances for success.

## **B. Limited Force**

The Soviets have often employed small numbers of regular military personnel in the third world. These were usually defensive forces such as limited numbers of fighter pilots

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<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>9</sup>Jonathan R. Adelman, "The Soviet Use of Force: Four Case Studies of Soviet Crisis Decision-Making", *Crossroads: An International Socio-Political Journal*, No. 16, 1985, p. 76.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 77.

to protect the capitals of North Korea and Egypt or crews for surface-to-air missile batteries in North Vietnam, Egypt, and Syria. As a rule, the Soviets have sought to limit the visibility of these forces and/or the provocativeness of their appearance outside Soviet borders. One way of doing this was by stressing the defensive nature of the weapons themselves and by deploying them in internationally acceptable defensive roles. The Soviets have also tried to minimize controversy surrounding the deployment of these limited forces by insisting the soldiers were only advisers and that they were not involved in the fighting. (Indeed, it was not until last year that Moscow acknowledged for the first time that Soviet soldiers had participated in military actions in North Vietnam, Korea, Egypt, Syria, Angola, and Ethiopia.<sup>12</sup>) However, with the possible exception of the SAM crews in Egypt in 1973, these Soviet forces have played a relatively minor role in determining the outcomes of third world military conflicts.

Arms transfers, rather than sending troops, have been the preferred limited force option for the Soviets in the third world. But in doing so, the Soviets have generally not provided clients with bombers or missiles with sufficient range to make deep strikes against population centers of another country. Apparently, the Soviets believe there are major risks of escalation associated with such weapons transfers and prefer to avoid too close association with their clients should escalation occur.<sup>13</sup> There are, however, exceptions to this pattern. Most notably are the limited transfer of Frog-7 and SCUD missiles to Syria and Egypt; the later transfer of SCUDs to Iraq; and the supply of SU-24 FENCERS to Libya.

Moscow has also tended not to send its most sophisticated weapons to a client. In part, the general technological backwardness of most third world soldiers explains this practice. Equally important, however, Soviet policy makers are sensitive to the symbolic and political significance of weapons transfers. They are quite concerned that they not be painted as "destabilizing" a region, particularly one where they have limited security interests. Additionally, Soviet military planners may fret about a loss of confidence among Soviet political decision makers if front-line Soviet weapons do poorly against American

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<sup>11</sup>Michel Tatu, "Intervention in Eastern Europe", in Diplomacy and Power, ed. Stephen S. Kaplan, The Brookings Institution, 1981, p. 262.

<sup>12</sup>Robert Evans, "Moscow Now Admits Combat Role in War in Vietnam, Elsewhere", Philadelphia Inquirer, October 13, 1989, p. 17D.

<sup>13</sup>Bruce D. Porter, The USSR In Third World Conflicts, Cambridge University Press, London, 1981, p. 227.



weapons or if the most modern Soviet weapons are captured and turned over to the U.S. for analysis -- a concern rooted in previous experience with the Arabs battling Israel in Syria, Egypt, and Lebanon.

### C. Surrogates

Although generally conservative in sending its own troops abroad, the Soviets find it advantageous to support communist allies in military actions outside Europe (e.g., Angola, Ogaden, Vietnam). This arrangement allows the Soviets to undertake operations that would otherwise be impossible or too risky from both military and political standpoints. That is because the overseas deployment of Cuban troops raises far less alarm in the United States than a like number of Soviet soldiers. At the same time, significant numbers of well trained troops who are already familiar with Soviet weapons lets the USSR influence the outcome of third world situations to its advantage. Also, if the U.S. reacts, military resources which otherwise might have been directed against the Soviet Union in Europe are diverted elsewhere.

On the down side, extensive use of proxies does serious damage to overall East-West relations with negative consequences for areas important to the Soviet Union (e.g., arms control, access to foreign technology). Also the overall increase in tension caused by surrogate actions makes other initiatives more dangerous for Moscow. Finally, widespread military support of surrogates increases the burden on an already beleaguered Soviet economy.<sup>14</sup>

If used sparingly, surrogates allow the Soviets to pursue a low risk, relatively low cost strategy with large potential for easing U.S. pressure on the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, frequent use of surrogates raises risks in other areas to abnormally high levels because of generally increased East-West tensions. For these reasons, it is probably not surprising that the Soviets have been quite judicious in using surrogates.

## III. CONFRONTATION

A major tenet of Soviet security policy since World War II has been to avoid direct confrontations with the United States which might lead to war. Instead, they have

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<sup>14</sup>Francis Fukuyama, "Military Aspects of U.S.-Soviet Competition in the Third World", ed. Marshall D. Shulman, East-West Tensions in the Third World, W. W. Norton, New York, 1986, p. 206.

<sup>15</sup>Allan E. Goodman, "Lessons of A Crisis", The Sun, October 15, 1982, p. A17.

preferred a "low risk strategy that offers small but steady gains, rather than a high risk strategy offering potentially higher pay-offs."<sup>16</sup>

In keeping with this policy, the Soviets do not make direct, specific threats of military action against the United States. Instead, Soviet political leaders utter ominous, but imprecise, expressions as a way of keeping the U.S. off balance. These veiled threats lack specifics of what will happen or when it will take place. Such an approach keeps the initiative clearly in Soviet hands and allows them to back away gracefully if the United States appears ready to respond.

The Soviets appear much more willing to threaten military force against U.S. clients than against the United States itself when that threat constitutes a low risk action to achieve limited objectives.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the Soviets have threatened to intervene militarily in the Middle East six times since World War II. Each time, however, the Soviets:

- delayed entry until after peak of the crisis had past (i.e., a resolution was already in sight);
- used extremely imprecise language which implied an intent to intervene, while avoiding a binding commitment to do so; and
- were reasonably certain the actions would not result in an irrevocable superpower confrontation with the United States.<sup>18</sup>

The Soviets have used a number of devices to minimize the chances for direct confrontation or, failing that, to defuse the situation before it got out of Soviet control. One approach has been for the Soviets to delineate spheres of influence through high-level agreements with major enemies. For example, Soviet agreements with Hitler divided East and Central Europe in such a way that the Soviets had a free hand with Finland. Similar thinking seemed to underlay Soviet bargaining strategy at the Yalta summit. More recently, the Soviets were the prime movers behind the Helsinki Agreement with President Ford which the Soviets interpreted as codifying their World War II security gains in Eastern Europe. As mentioned earlier, the Soviets also limit their exposure by making few commitments to action or doing so in a way that allows them a face-saving escape clause.

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<sup>16</sup>John Van Oudenaren, The Soviet Union and Second-Area Actions, RAND, N-2035-FF/RC, September 1983, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup>Hannes Adomeit, Soviet Risk-Taking and Crisis Behavior: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1984, p. 318.

<sup>18</sup>Francis Fukuyama, Soviet Threats to Intervene in the Middle East 1956-1973, RAND, N-1577-FF, June 1980, p. v.

While Soviets have generally avoided confrontation with the United States, there have been several significant exceptions to this pattern: twice over Berlin (1948 and 1961) and then in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. In all three cases, things went badly for the Soviets. They took large risks and achieved little. Worse yet, these defeats were public ones -- a serious problem for any Soviet policy maker given the dynamics of Soviet domestic politics. Each case demonstrated the futility of trying to compel the United States to do something.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, Khrushchev might have come away from the Berlin crisis of 1961 with the belief (based on the U.S. non-response to the Berlin Wall) that the Soviets could get away with *fait accompli* because of the deterrent power of the Soviet nuclear arsenal.<sup>20</sup> If this were the case, the Soviets were disabused of the notion in the Cuban missile crisis.

Direct confrontations with the U.S. twice over Berlin and during the Cuban missile crisis were exceptions to traditional and subsequent patterns of Soviet risk-taking.<sup>21</sup> Therefore Western analysts must be careful in using any of these cases (except as negative examples) to illustrate the kind of risks the Soviets are likely to run in future. Indeed, Soviet commentators today describe those adventures as "harebrained schemes".<sup>22</sup>

#### IV. WEAPONS PROCUREMENT

Soviet practices of limiting risks in using military power carry over into their weapons procurement practices. The traditional practice of purchasing large numbers of each system in part reflects Soviet concerns that worst case estimates of enemy strength may prove true (as they did in World War II). Also, just as the Soviets tend to overestimate the technological capabilities of U.S. weapons, they may also under-value the capabilities of their own.<sup>23</sup> This may be because of their intimate insights into unique Soviet system deficiencies as well as the poor system performance in various "test" situations (e.g., detecting a West German's overflight and landing in Moscow). Indeed, defecting MiG-25 pilot Victor Belenko claimed that Soviet pilots had little confidence in the

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<sup>19</sup>Hannes Adomeit, "Soviet Risk Taking and Crisis Behaviour", in Soviet Strategy, ed. John Baylis and Gerald Segal, Croom Helm, London, 1981, p. 191.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>21</sup>Adomeit, Soviet Risk-Taking and Crisis Behavior: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, Op. Cit., p. 315.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>23</sup>Lambeth, Op. Cit., p. 13.

ability of front-line interceptors to deal with low-altitude penetration by U.S. bombers.<sup>24</sup> The current Soviet Deputy Minister of Defense for Armaments has also confessed that concern for system reliability is one of the reasons the Soviets procure individual systems in large numbers.<sup>25</sup>

Minimizing risk is also an essential part of Soviet strategy for weapons design and development. Soviet weapons designers have long been constrained to use only proven technological concepts in designs and to make relatively small technological jumps from one model to the next. Even when large technological jumps are incorporated into new designs, overall risks are minimized in other ways. For example, the Soviet T-64 tank incorporated (for them) a surprisingly large number of major technological advancements; e.g., new multi-fuel engine, combined metal-ceramic armor, larger main gun, and a significantly modified track. To minimize the risk associated with these technological leaps, the Soviets were concurrently developing the T-72 tank which had far fewer technological innovations. The ultimate choice of a replacement main battle tank was thus put off until both the T-64 and T-72 were thoroughly field tested. (A wise decision given the plethora of technical problems that subsequently surfaced with the original version of the T-64.)

## V. FINAL OBSERVATIONS

### A. General Trends

Soviet leaders have generally adopted a risk averse approach to procuring weapons and using military power, especially if using it risked direct confrontation with the United States. This pattern has remained generally true even as Soviet military capabilities have grown *vis a vis* the United States. This is not to say that the Soviets never take risks; they have been quick to take advantage of opportunities that have arisen, provided the risks were not too high. Admittedly, there are several exceptions to the general pattern, but in each instance that the Soviet Union has taken large risks to realize potentially large gains it has fared rather badly. Such experiences are likely to discourage similar behavior in future.

Since the previous conclusions are drawn from long-standing historical tendencies, one must ask: Are the historical behavior patterns described in this paper still valid in view

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<sup>24</sup>John Barron, MiG Pilot, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1980, p. 72.

<sup>25</sup>"Shabanov Views Defense Industry Conversion", Krasnaya Zvezda, August 18, 1989, First Edition, pp-1-2 as translated in FBIS-SOV-160, August 21, p. 121.

of Mikhail Gorbachev's apparent willingness to take risks? We believe the answer is yes. The great changes now sweeping Soviet policy-making are recent manifestations of traditional behavior given the state of the Soviet economy. That is, Soviet leaders have always been willing to run large risks when the consequences of inaction appeared to be greater. Thus, apparent Soviet decisions to adopt a less aggressive security policy can be interpreted as a conservative approach to finding the resources necessary to reinvigorate the lagging Soviet economy and industrial base. Regardless, the thrust of Gorbachev's current security policies will reduce Soviet military capabilities, thereby making the traditional risk-averse strategy even more attractive. Lastly, Soviet leaders have often minimized foreign adventures when domestic sectors were in turmoil. Consequently, historical Soviet predilections for minimizing risk in security policy will probably continue under Gorbachev.

## **B. Implications for SDI**

For the above reasons, it is not surprising that the traditional Soviet low-risk, non-confrontational approach to security problems in general has so far carried over to Soviet actions for dealing with SDI. Soviet commentators to date have made no threats of military action against the deployment or operation of a strategic defense system. Instead, the Soviets have identified potential countermeasures to such a system, emphasized their effectiveness, and asserted Soviet capability to field them. In keeping with traditional practices, the Soviets have also not committed themselves to build any particular set of countermeasures. Such a strategy offers the twin advantages of keeping Soviet technological and operational options open as long as possible while also avoiding situations where the Soviet Union must either act in a certain way or lose face by backing away. (The latter is a particularly serious problem for Soviet leaders given the dynamics of domestic politics.) All of this suggests considerable talk about, but few concrete actions against, SDI in the near term.

The foregoing analysis of past Soviet security behavior suggests several other things as well. For one, the Soviets will probably opt for countermeasures that incorporate proven technologies and/or proliferate multiple measures with overlapping capabilities as a hedge against technological shortfalls or against underestimating the quantities necessary to do the job. Also, it appears unlikely that the Soviets will take any direct action against a strategic defense system in peace time in order to avoid direct confrontation which might lead to war with the United States.